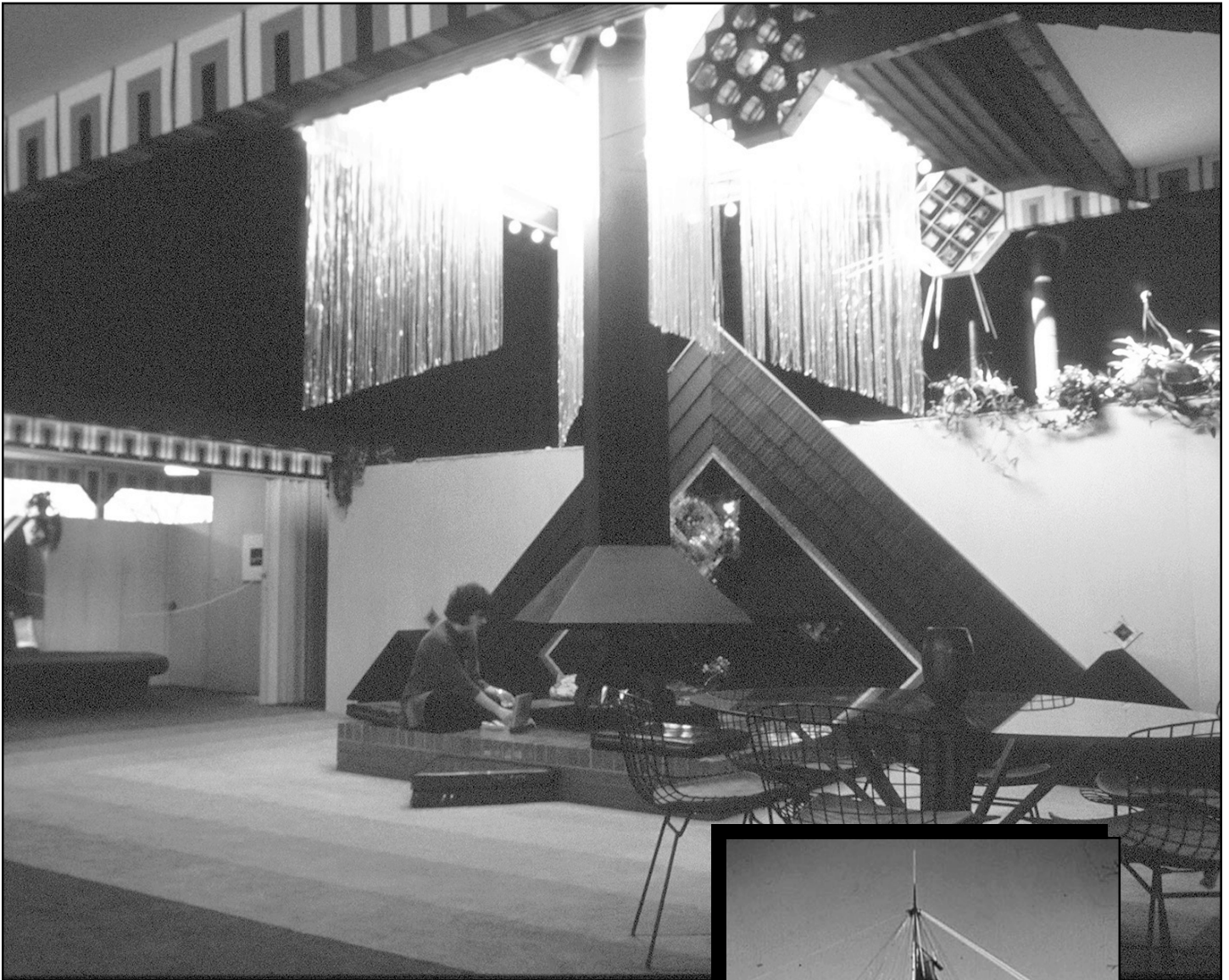


# Kansas Preservation

Newsletter of the Cultural Resources Division ▪ Kansas State Historical Society



*The architectural achievements of native Kansan Bruce Goff not only mark a page in the history of Modern Architecture in the United States, but also mark a significant page in the history of architecture in Kansas.*

*See pages 5-8.*

# Recognizing His Kansas Contribution: The Architecture of Bruce Goff



*Bruce Goff, along with others of his generation, followed the work and theories of Frank Lloyd Wright early in his career and embraced this notion of architecture as integral organisms in harmony with nature; yet he incorporated his life and his experiences into his work and discovered an organic expression of his own.*

The architecture of Bruce Goff is most recognizable by the unique building forms that transcend both era and location. His work has largely been termed “organic architecture,” a description more commonly associated with Frank Lloyd Wright. Because Goff chose a style so closely associated with Wright, he was often overshadowed by the world’s most famous architect. It is because of his relentless pursuit of self-expression and his attention to the lifestyles of his clients that Goff’s work, spanning an astonishing six decades, stands on its own merit. The work of Bruce Goff not only marks a page in the history of Modern Architecture in the United States, but it also marks a significant page in the history of architecture in Kansas.

Bruce Goff was born in the small town of Alton, Kansas, in 1904. His mother was originally from Ellis, Kansas, and his father from Missouri. Goff’s parents met in WaKeeney, Kansas, where his mother taught school and worked at a jewelry store. They married in 1903 and moved to Alton soon after. The family lived in Kansas only a short time and then moved to Oklahoma around 1906, but Bruce Goff’s ties to Kansas were not severed permanently.

## A Search for Self Expression

Early in Goff’s life, his father recognized a penchant for design. He was so enamored with the boy’s drawings of imaginary buildings that he showed the drawings to some architecture firms. With his father’s encouragement Goff began his architectural career working for Tulsa’s E. A. Rush and Company as an architectural apprentice at age twelve. After graduating from high school he joined the firm full-time.

There he first learned of Frank Lloyd Wright and the philosophy behind his work. It is Wright who is most notably identified with the concept of organic expression. His work was labeled by many as “organic” based on forms of “living structures” where features or parts are so ordered in form and material that they are considered integral as a whole. Goff, along with others of his generation, followed the work and theories of Frank Lloyd Wright early in his career and embraced this notion of architecture as integral organisms in harmony with nature; yet he incorporated his life and his experiences into his work and discovered an organic expression of his own.



## A Sampling of Goff's Unique Architecture in Kansas

*(Far Left) The Roland Jacquart House in Sublette was built in 1965.*

*(Left) The Lawrence Hyde House was constructed in Prairie Village in 1965.*

*(Below) The Paul Searing House was built in 1966 in Prairie Village. (Photos by David Sachs, AIA)*

When the depression of the 1930's hit Tulsa, there was little work and E. A. Rush Company closed in 1932. Shortly thereafter Goff moved to Chicago to find work and continue his search for his architectural identity. In August of 1942 Goff joined the Navy, and after spending a year in the Aleutian Islands with a construction battalion, he was transferred to Camp Parks near San Francisco. Here he was given the opportunity to design and remodel several buildings on base and experiment with a variety of common off-the-shelf materials and manufactured products. His Navy experiences led him to explore new and ingenious ways of using materials in his designs. By his discharge, Goff was on a path of architectural expression that would soon set him apart from his contemporaries.

Although Goff never had attended college, he began teaching at the University of Oklahoma in Norman in 1947. He was soon appointed chairman of the School of Architecture, serving until 1955 when he left to pursue full-time practice. Goff produced much of his best work while in Norman, including arguably his best house, the Bavinger House (see photo on page 10) outside of Norman in 1955 and the Pollack House in Oklahoma City in 1957. By this time his work was recognized across the United States.

### The Kansas Connection

In 1956 Goff moved to Bartlesville and continued to work on his own until 1964 when he joined an Oklahoma developer to create a prefabricated housing development project in Kansas City, Missouri. Although the housing project was never built, Goff remained in Kansas City



and continued to practice. He designed several houses there, including four in Kansas. Two of the houses were located in Prairie Village, Kansas: the Lawrence Hyde house built in 1965 and the Paul Searing house built in 1966. Both were built in older neighborhoods alongside traditional style homes. The Hyde house plan was rectilinear, but the plan for the Searing house was hexagonal and met serious resistance from a couple of neighborhood associations. Because of this conflict, the owner was forced to change the house's location twice. It was finally built in Prairie Village.

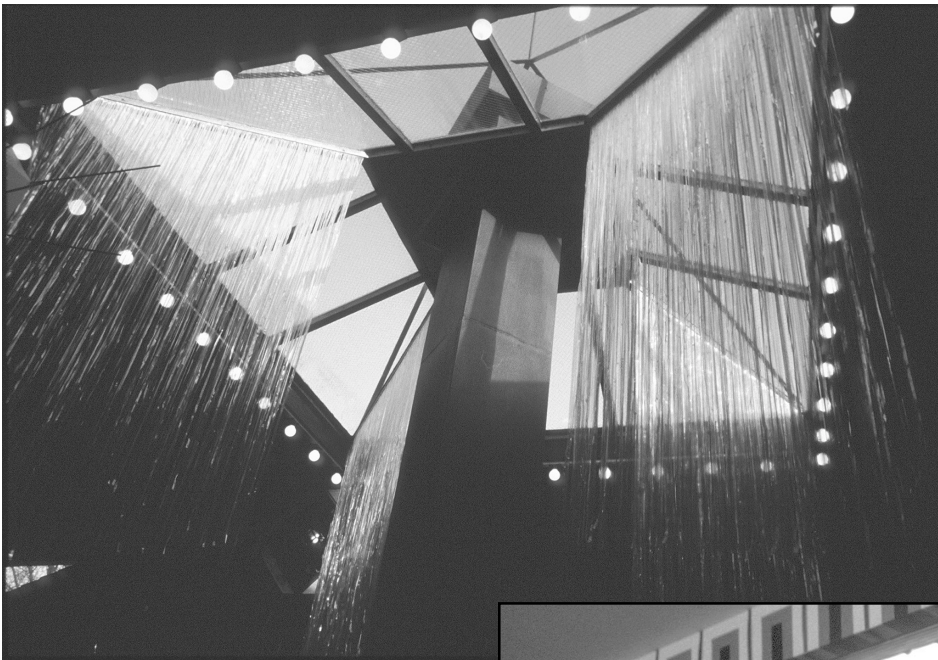
While still working in Kansas City, Goff designed other buildings throughout the state and region including two homes built in western Kansas. The Roland Jacquart house (1965) in Sublette was a single-story house organized around an atrium. The other was the Glenn Mitchell house (1968) in Dodge City; with an an-

gular geometry and a large sloping wood shingle roof, its unique form was a topic of local controversy.

Goff continued to work in Kansas City on projects through the 1960s and spent several months traveling to Europe and Asia. He was asked often to lecture and accepted temporary teaching positions with several universities during his time in Kansas City. Late in 1970 Goff moved to Tyler, Texas, where he continued to practice. His long career came to a close in 1982 when his health began to fail. He died of kidney disease at age 78.

### Theory of Design

In recent years, Goff-designed houses have been recognized as historically significant. Several houses and buildings in Oklahoma have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Donald Pollack house (1957) in Oklahoma City and the John Frank



*The skylight (left) and the accompanying fireplace (below) provide the focal point in the open floor plan of the Lawrence Hyde House. (Photos by David Sachs, AIA)*

house (1955) in Sapupla, Oklahoma, west of Tulsa, were listed despite being less than 50 years old. The Oklahoma Historical Society also developed a multiple property context statement for “Resources Designed by Bruce Goff in Oklahoma.” The context statement now includes six properties.

Although the Kansas Goff-designed houses are much younger than the Oklahoma houses, they still share many of the characteristics of Goff’s organic expression. Four of the characteristics expressed in his Kansas work are (1) the use of the open plan, (2) incorporating natural light, (3) a dominant roof form and (4) the use of materials. All these forms of expression stand out as solid examples of his talent and should be recognized as such.

The quality and richness of interior space was always very important to Goff; he often utilized the open plan to organize the house and create a rich open space. This can be seen in both Prairie Village houses, which integrate a central fireplace as a focal point to the space. The Hyde house plan is rectilinear with a conversation area surrounding the fireplace. The Searing house is an open hexagonal plan with only a few permanent walls; accordion partitions divide the open space into separate zones and allow the central fireplace to be seen and felt from every room in the house. While both Prairie Village houses differ in form, their modest scale enables them to fit pleasantly within the environment of their neighborhoods.

To introduce natural light Goff used clerestory windows, skylights, and high



windows. In addition to bringing in natural light, this strategy was also intended to focus inward to focal points such as central fireplaces in the Searing and Hyde houses or the central courtyard in the Roland Jacquart house in Sublette. Skylights at both the Searing and Hyde houses wrapped around the fireplace stack, opening up the top of the roof to the sky and illuminating the open space below.

Dominant roof forms helped shape Goff’s unique organic expression. Often his houses had large overhangs with thin eaves set over a large expanse of glass, giving the roof a sense of lightness. The roof of the Glenn Mitchell house in Dodge City swooped upward, giving the roof the sense of flight as it floated over

clerestory glass bringing in natural light to the open space. With the Searing house, Goff again experimented with cable-suspended roof systems as he used at the Bavinger house in Norman. Here the cables were anchored to brackets to support the corners of the geometric shaped roof and hung from the central masts flanking the fireplace stack. The suspended roof heightened the feeling of lightness of the roof and gave drama to the building’s form.

Although many houses were unique by their distinctive forms, Goff’s use of materials gave his designs a sense of individuality. He experimented with many different materials for his houses; a house designed by Bruce Goff was often a composition of a variety of materials. His

uncommon pursuit for the appropriate material for his designs led him to select materials and products common for other uses. Goff used multi-colored glass cullet (a byproduct of glass manufacturing) as masonry pieces in a stone wall at the Glenn Mitchell house; giving the house a strong organic expression by anchoring the wood house to the earth and the illusion of growing upward through the rough stone wall. Stained wood shingles on the sloping vertical walls at the Hyde House and Mitchell House, give a rich texture to the buildings' form.

Color also played an important role with the materials he envisioned. The shingles at the Hyde house were stained dark green and provide contrast with an orange tile pattern below the roof line. At the Searing house the mast and brackets supporting the cables were a bright turquoise in stark contrast to the white stucco walls and dark green base of the garage.

Goff was selective in his use of ornament and how it fit within the palette and composition of each house. Goff would give the same thoughtfulness to details and patterns used at smaller elements such as doors and handrails. His innovative use of materials, color, and ornament in composition with the building form gave his houses individual expression and truly separated his architecture from the work of others.

## A Legacy of Individual Expression

Goff's individual expression also created obstacles because it did not fit the mainstream approach to building. Many of the homeowners shared a similar difficulty finding financing and contractors willing to build the unique Goff-designed houses. In fact, the same contractor built all the Goff houses in Kansas City area because no one else would build them. This resistance was not an uncommon occurrence.

Despite his great success, Goff never placed his desire for self-expression above the wishes of the owner; in fact, understanding his client was what drove him to discover that individual expression. He wanted to know his clients and learn what motivated them. Often their favorite color or a significant piece of art they treasured would be incorporated into the design. His clients fell in love with his ideas because of this personal manifestation.

Goff's contribution to organic architecture did not go unnoticed by the architectural community. Mentor, friend, and



*The Bavinger House in Norman, Oklahoma, was constructed in 1955. (Photo credit unknown.)*

sometimes worst critic Frank Lloyd Wright once called Bruce Goff "one of the most talented members of a group of young architects devoted to an indigenous architecture for America."

His architecture represents his passion for expression and his genius to unify independent components into a greater whole through his use of structure, material, and form. His ability to bring individuality to his projects by reflecting his clients' needs and experiences and incorporating the specific characteristics of each site gave his projects drama. This view of individuality defines Goff's architecture in Kansas and

gives his buildings significance.

The integrity of his Kansas work is remarkably strong today, in part because many of the structures are still occupied by the original owners who enjoy sharing their experiences working with Bruce Goff. We should acknowledge Bruce Goff's contribution to Kansas history and embrace his architecture and its importance in the landscape of Kansas.

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*This article was prepared by Bruce Wrightsman, AIA. Bruce is the Heritage Trust Fund architect for the Cultural Resources Division.*